

The Miracle of Atheism

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Contemporary forms of atheism among analytic philosophers are rooted largely in the skeptical writings of David Hume and his empiricism. During the Scottish Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, Hume recommended that any claims to knowledge about the world, God and the self which were not based on sensory experience should be committed to the flames!¹ This attack on traditional metaphysics was intended to destroy the foundation for the proofs for God's existence.

Hume's empiricism formed the basis for the rise of a new philosophy known first as logical positivism and later called logical empiricism. It first emerged during the years following World War I from a group of ex-scientists turned philosophers who were located in Vienna, Austria. The influence of these ex-scientists/philosophers quickly spread throughout Britain and America, primarily through the writings of A. J. Ayer and Rudolf Carnap.²

Their methods limited the scope of philosophy to logical analysis. More specifically, philosophy was defined strictly as the logic of science. Only empirical statements supported by the scientific method could form the basis for meaningful, factual statements. This meant the rejection of traditional theism in particular because it could not be confirmed or disconfirmed by appealing directly to sensory experience. Ayer called this sensory test of truth the verification principle.³

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It is now well known that logical empiricism self-destructed.⁴ For it became obvious that the verification principle itself was self-contradictory because it could neither be confirmed nor disconfirmed; as a theory it was not subject to sensory experience. To be sure, the logical empiricists recognized this difficulty by inconsistently allowing for an exception to their own premise.⁵ It also destroyed the basis for ethical theory, reducing all moral judgements to mere sentiment. The logical empiricist's claim that all ethics is a matter of mere emotion is an absolute ethical judgment itself and can for that very reason be dismissed as mere emotion according to its own principle.

These two difficulties in themselves were enough to make the logical empiricist's criterion of truth problematic, but the fatal flaw to logical empiricism was exposed when it was realized that both science and history were also undermined, since both disciplines made statements about things which could not be directly experienced. After all, the mission of logical empiricism was to free the world of pretentious metaphysics, superstition, and religious beliefs. Its simultaneous and unintended destruction of scientific and historical knowledge was too much. Australian philosopher John Passmore notes: "Throw metaphysics into the fire, and science goes with it, preserve science from the flames and metaphysics comes creeping back."⁶

Empiricist J. L. Mackie rejected logical positivism because, "this theory of meaning is itself highly implausible. It is well known that the adoption of it would similarly create serious difficulties for the meaning of many ordinary statements, including all those about past, historical events, or about the minds, thoughts and feelings of persons other than oneself."⁷

Though philosophically logical empiricism self-destructed, it continues in a modified form today among many Anglo-American philosophers as a basis for refuting traditional theism. The atheism of J. L. Mackie is typical. He was a reader in Philosophy at Oxford University and fellow of University College, Oxford, prior to his death in 1981. Our purpose here will be to examine some of the critical points raised against traditional theism. Special attention will be given to Mackie. A careful consideration of his atheistic perspective is deserving for at least three reasons.

First, J. L. Mackie is considered by many as representative of the most persuasive form of atheism found in Anglo-American philosophy. Toward the end of his life, Mackie developed his most complete statement on religious atheism in his book, *The Miracle of Theism*, which was published posthumously. Kai Nielsen, who is also one of the most articulate atheists in this century, says that this book is "one of the most, probably the most, distinguished articulation of an atheistic point of view given in the twentieth century."⁸

Second, his thinking is mainly rooted in the arguments of David Hume, who is the patron saint of most contemporary Anglo-American atheists. We will thus engage the thinking of both Hume and Mackie in assessing the evidence for belief in God.

Third, Mackie extends the thinking of the skeptical David Hume into a full blown atheism. David Hume nowhere directly embraced atheism. The brunt of his attack was largely upon the dogmatic proofs for God's existence widely assumed in the deistic thinking of his time. He also attacked the foundation of Christian faith in miracles. Hume at least allowed for the possible existence of God based upon the design argument, and he was outraged with the dogmatic atheism of the French materialists.⁹ Mackie transforms the skepticism of Hume into a dogmatic form of atheism. Whereas Hume said that the claims for Christian faith cannot be reasonably supported in matters of fact, Mackie says any concept of God cannot be reasonably supported. Whereas Hume said Christian faith is a "miracle" in the pejorative sense—that no right-thinking person should be able to embrace it because of insufficient evidence, Mackie extends this argument to include any claim for belief in God. Hence the title of Mackie's book, *The Miracle of Theism*. I shall argue, in contrast, that atheism is a "miracle" in Hume's sense of being irrational because the evidence for belief in God is there for anyone who wills to know it.

One further comment about the importance of considering Mackie's defense of atheism. Michael Novak observes that the majority of intellectual people, especially scientists, artists, and professors in the United States, are atheists.¹⁰ Christian theists are morally obligated to consider and understand the reasons why thoughtful people embrace atheism if they are to engage in meaningful dialogue with current thinking.

IS GOD-TALK INTELLIGIBLE?

Unlike some contemporary atheists, Mackie affirms the intelligibility of the traditional concept of God—as a personal being who is transcendent, creator of all things, free to act with intention, omnipotent, omniscient, perfect in goodness and worthy of worship. He thinks that the contemporary theistic philosopher, Richard Swinburne, has shown that the logic of traditional religious language is unequivocal, unambiguous and perfectly clear.¹¹ Nonetheless, Mackie rightly points out that logical coherence is not in itself convincing evidence.¹² Swinburne likewise affirms the same point. Whether or not God really exists is not determined simply by the question of the logic of religious language. Of course, if religious language is incoherent, then it hardly could be affirmed that God actually exists. But the coherence of theistic language and the actuality of God's existence are logically distinct questions.¹³

Mackie understandably excludes any discussion of non-traditional theists. This neglect is not appreciated especially by process theologians. Daniel Day Williams complains that philosophical critics of theism snub process theology. He writes: "The entire discussion about religious language has gone on as if the only conception of God which can be offered is that of traditional Christian theism especially in the form it takes in Anglican orthodoxy."¹⁴

Mackie clearly explains the reason for this omission in his reference to process theologian, Paul Tillich. If the concept of God excludes the notion of personality and self-consciousness, then such talk about God is "so watered down as to be not only indisputable but uninteresting. If God is simply whatever you care most about, then not even St. Anselm's fool will deny that God exists. But so easy a victory is not worth winning."¹⁵ Only if a definition of God includes the idea of self-consciousness is it worth debating.

IS GOD-TALK SENSIBLE?

Granted that the main affirmations of theism are coherent, Mackie believed that only arguments rooted in sensory experience will decide the truthfulness of traditional theism.¹⁶ He rejected the earlier logical positivism and embraced a "weak verificationist view, that all our terms have to be given meaning by their use is *some* statements that are verifiable or confirmable in our experience."¹⁷ This weakened form of logical empiricism still assumes that all knowledge is rooted in ordinary sensory experience. For example, even if we cannot verify the statement, "It was raining an hour ago," Mackie says we still can accept it as a meaningful statement since it is grounded in ordinary sensory experience.¹⁸

Mackie's weakened version of the verificationist theory of meaning still excludes the possibility that God exists unless God is known to us directly through our sensory experience. Unless one can physically see, hear, smell, touch, or taste directly for oneself the evidence for the reality of God, then we have no rational basis for believing. This is why one contemporary atheist, Kai Nielsen, frankly says only an anthropomorphic theism is rationally coherent, while the developed concept of God in Judeo-Christian tradition is incoherent.¹⁹ Why? Because the God of Christian theology transcends the world and is not literally another finite being alongside other beings in the world. Because of this, God cannot be literally sensed! God is Spirit (John 4:24), not an object capable of being put inside a scientific laboratory. Since he cannot thus be verified in our sensory (or sensible) experience, not even a weak verificationist theory of meaning will allow that he could possibly exist. It is apparent that Mackie (and Nielsen) is still shackled by the earlier logical empiricism which assumed that all statements of fact must be verified through our own five senses. It is thus difficult, if not "unintelligible," to take Mackie seriously when he concedes that traditional religious language is coherent.

It is understandable that Mackie excludes historical revelations, tradition and common certainties as bases for belief considering his Humean empiricism.²⁰ He thus gives considerable attention to the traditional philosophical arguments for God's existence—the ontological, cosmological, teleological and moral arguments. The focus of our attention, however, will not be upon his critique of these arguments. As insightful and convincing as the philosophical theistic arguments are, as numerous contemporary philosophers of religion have demonstrated

(Mascall, Hick, Swinburne, Kung, Plantinga, Pannenberg), and despite Mackie's negative evaluation of them, we will not focus upon them because they are not the fundamental reasons for believing in the God of Christian faith. Besides, his weak verificationist theory of meaning has already excluded the success of these arguments even before he examines them. His epistemic presupposition really makes the extensive argumentation in his treatise altogether unnecessary. The possibility of proving God has been eliminated even before the argumentation has begun! For God is not a sensible fact, i.e., not an observable fact through our five senses.

Mackie's verificationist theory deserves at least two other criticisms. First, his weakened version of logical empiricism is self-refuting. Like the logical empiricists, he insists that factual statements must be "verifiable or confirmable in our experience."²¹ This theory may be logically coherent as an abstract idea, but who has ever sensed it? That is, you can't touch, feel, taste, hear or smell this theory. Yet the theory requires that any claim to truth must be sensed! What is surprising is that Mackie does not even consider this self-contradiction which often was made against the logical empiricists.

The famous British philosopher, Bertrand Russell, also embraced Humean empiricism. He acknowledged this dilemma. He recognized that this theory of sensory experience as the basis for all claims to knowledge could not be rationally resolved, but nonetheless said that it was a justifiable hypothesis since it was foundational to knowing! Russell thus interpreted this sensory, inductive approach to all knowing as a logically independent principle which cannot be derived from sensory experience itself.²² This is a fancy way of saying that since everybody relies on their own sense experiences and we all come up with essentially the same opinions, then it is okay to take it on faith that it is a true theory! In terms of scientific discovery and ordinary knowledge of physical things, we do require sensory experience. But this is hardly justification for restricting all possible knowledge to what can be sensed. Even contemporary philosophy of science shows that natural science is as dependent on intuitive thinking as it is upon empirical experience. This verificationist theory is self-refuting and ought to be committed to the flames, as Hume unwittingly encouraged others to do with traditional metaphysics without realizing that his judgment applied to his own theory as well. Only if there is a personal, infinite Reason which accounts for the existence of our finite reason is it philosophically justifiable to trust our sensory experiences. To depend upon finite reason is implicitly to depend upon a larger, more universal, self-existent Reason which is the reason why anything exists. The alternative is nihilism, which both Hume and Mackie reject. Hence, if we finally have to admit, as Russell did, that a Humean theory of knowledge is based on a conviction which is not subject to its own rational demands, then we inevitably move back to Hume's skepticism. Mackie rejected skepticism, but to adopt Hume's empiricism without his skepticism is sheer dogmatism.

A second issue which must be broached immediately is this question: Does faith in God depend upon our argumentation or upon God's self-revelation? This question will be addressed later on, but for now it should be acknowledged that the traditional belief in the biblical God did not come about originally through rational, philosophical reflection. If God exists, his reality is determined for us by his own initiative. Mackie assumes that human rationality alone must decide the issue of God's existence. Christian theology, in contrast, has developed its rational understanding of God's existence in the light of his self-disclosure in history. Paul argues that God showed himself "in the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4)—by which he means that when the human race had reached a mature point when it could appreciate and understand God's true nature, then God introduced himself personally and fully. Out of God's self-introduction, Christian theology was then able to construct a rational/theological understanding through reflecting on the meaning of this divine disclosure. To take seriously Christian belief in God should require that one examine in detail the main reason why Christians believe in God, namely the history of revelation. Mackie's almost exclusive focus on rational argumentation based on his verificationist theory of truth ignores the original reason why Christians believe.

IS GOD-TALK RATIONAL?

Mackie believes deductive and non-deductive arguments will determine the question of God's existence.²³ He points out there is an *a priori*, deductive element in all thinking, but he gives priority to the *a posteriori*, non-deductive element. More pointedly, there must be clear evidence of an empirical kind to convince the thoughtful person today that God exists.

Many of Mackie's epistemic considerations are surely on target. It is insufficient for faith to be grounded simply on itself. Otherwise faith degenerates into superstition. Theistic claims thus cannot be exempted from a critical examination of the evidence. In fact, the modern demand for critical reflection on the nature of truth is the product of Christian theology itself. Christian faith would not be true to itself if it rejected critical thinking.

Mackie's too brief dismissal of the rational claims of a historical revelation of God in Jesus may be in part because he already had adopted Hume's attitude about causal reasoning. It is highly interesting, not to say paradoxical or even contradictory, that Hume's primary rejection of divine action in history is because it would constitute a miracle, and a miracle would be a contradiction of the causal laws of nature. Hume says such a violation of the law of causality cannot be allowed.²⁴ Yet, and here is the curious turn in his thinking, his so-called skepticism about the cosmological proof of God is based on his denial that we can know whether there is any such thing as causality.²⁵ The only things we know, he says, are things which are immediately sensuous—i.e., what we can physically see, touch, hear, smell, and taste. Incidentally, Hume's skepticism

about causality is the very thing that Kant said "awakened me of out my dogmatic slumber"²⁶ because Hume's theory destroyed the philosophical basis of science itself.

At any rate, Hume wanted to have it both ways. He uses the law of causality against theistic arguments, but then uses it in a self-serving way to support his religious skepticism. Interestingly enough, Mackie embraces Hume's argument to support his reasons for not believing in the Christian revelation of God in history, but nowhere does he note this logical inconsistency in Hume's thinking.

In fact, Mackie falls victim to the same contradiction. He argues against the cosmological argument (Leibiniz's version) because we allegedly cannot know that everything must have a sufficient reason.²⁷ Yet his argument against miracles is that it contradicts the natural law of reason which assumes that everything must have a rational, causal explanation.²⁸ He insists on the rational principle of causality to disallow miracle and justify his atheism, but he disqualifies the theist's use of causal reasoning which would require that God is the ultimate Cause of everything. Mackie dogmatically asserts that causal reasoning justifies atheism, and at the same time dogmatically disallows causal reasoning to be used by theists for explaining the origin of the world. Like Hume, it is "okay" when the principle of causality serves his purposes, but not "okay" when it doesn't. He says that we might well wish the universe conformed to our intellectual preference for some ultimate cause, "but we have no right to assume that the universe will comply with our intellectual preferences."²⁹ In the same vein, Mackie should also allow that he might wish that the universe was not open to a divine miracle, but he has no right to assume that the universe will comply with his intellectual preference.

In the final analysis, whether or not a miracle has occurred (such as the incarnation of an infinite God) is a historical question, not merely a philosophical one. Further, if Mackie (as he must do) allows that causal reasoning is valid and necessary for understanding the sequence of individual occurrences in nature and in history, then it is even more compelling to see that the larger whole of reality also be explained according to causal reasoning. To say the whole of reality is an irrational given is to undermine reason itself. For that would be to say that there is no reason why reasoning exists, and if there is no reason why reasoning exists, then reason cannot exist! For it is the very nature of reasoning to find an explanation why everything and anything exists. Even if there were an infinite regress in the past so that the world was eternal, causal reasoning still requires us to ask the larger question of the whole and why there is anything rather than sheer nothing.

IS GOD-TALK MERELY EMOTIONAL?

The reasons for faith or unfaith are never simply based on the empirical evidence. The critical factor is personal judgment. Why do some people believe and

others do not? To be sure, a scholarly judgment to believe or not to believe is based on a consideration of the whole body of evidence, but this judgment is largely personal and intuitive. There are many factors which influence this intuitive judgment. Certainly cultural and traditional elements are important. Emotional factors as well are fairly decisive. The attitudes which we developed throughout our life are most important. Damaged emotions and hurt feelings, along with severely disappointing religious expectations, contribute to our attitudes of skepticism and despair. On the other hand, many do not believe because they fail to see the practical or personal relevance of faith. Others would like to believe, but think the empirical evidence is insufficient. Yet many believe because they see its practical and personal relevance, and are convinced of its rational/empirical evidence. Even in Jesus' day, some believed in him as the Son of God, but most did not.

To illustrate further the personal element of having to judge the evidence and logic of faith, one can observe the difference in opinion between Mackie and Kai Nielsen, both of whom are self-avowed atheists. Mackie thinks the logic of Christian theological language is entirely intelligible and coherent, but Nielsen frankly calls the God-language of Christian thought incoherent and confused. As we have pointed out, Richard Swinburne has devoted much of his scholarly efforts to demonstrating the coherence of Christian talk about God. Mackie agrees with Swinburne, but Nielsen does not. Yet both Mackie and Nielsen agree against Swinburne's view of theism.

How does one know whether Mackie or Nielsen is correct? Or Swinburne? The answer is in part that there is a personal/intuitive element in all knowing. Not only are the empirical facts of our experience characterized by epistemic probability, but even our understanding of what is logical is subject to dispute. This is not a case for skepticism, but a frank acknowledgement of our finite, limited understanding of the nature of truth.

Mackie is certainly correct in saying that a persuasive factor is our understanding of the evidence as a whole.³⁰ What Mackie minimizes is the larger role which intuitive judgments play in the decision-making process. More specifically, Mackie fails to show the larger role that our presuppositions exercise in the attitudes we develop concerning the larger body of evidence.

Of course, Mackie is right to point out that the psychological dimension is not an adequate foundation for a thoughtful person to base their faith on.³¹ But, Mackie fails to give the feeling dimension due consideration as part of the larger body of evidence. Aristotle (*De Anima* and *Rhetoric*), and the long history of philosophy, recognize the epistemic value of feeling and emotion.³² Mackie apparently would simply reduce religion to mere feeling and then dismiss it.

Feeling is intrinsic to a rational understanding of the meaning of life. While feeling is not always to be trusted in informing us about the objective truth of our world, we certainly could not know in the fullest sense of the term without

our capacity for feeling. Our capacity to know truly can go no deeper than our capacity to feel, but our feelings can certainly be deeper than our capacity to know. The larger body of people in the history of the world have generally relied more upon their feelings than upon their capacity to reason in deciding the fundamental issues of life. That does not mean feelings are inherently antithetical to reason, but our capacity for feeling is more spontaneous and provides us with a more immediate perception of things, whereas our capacity to reason is more deliberate and provides us with a mediated interpretation of reality.

The fact that religion is so deeply part and parcel of the human situation, as is evidenced by what most people in the history of the world have felt, cannot be easily discarded as irrational. To conclude that God does not exist because feeling is an integral part of religious belief is unjustifiable. While the tendency of modern theology has often been to put faith on the side of feeling (as Schleiermacher did), Mackie puts atheism on the side of reason and rejects the cognitive significance of feeling. Yet reason devoid of feeling is no longer true reason. For reason cannot dispense with the basic feeling of trust, meaningfulness, purpose, and unity and still do the task of developing a well-reasoned perspective on life.

Interestingly enough, the successor of A. J. Ayer as professor of logic at the University of Oxford is Michael Dummett, a devout Roman Catholic Christian. In contrast to Ayer who was the leading logical empiricist in Britain, his view is that if he did not believe in God, there would be little motivation for him to study philosophy and logic. He became a Christian because he thought it was the reasonable thing to do. He says, "I think it's only to do with the *zeitgeist* that religious belief is intellectually extremely unfashionable."³³

In regard to the impasse of the role of logic in deciding the question of God's existence, Heinz W. Cassirer's reason for becoming a Christian are revealing. His father was the eminent Kantian scholar, Ernst Cassirer. Heinz Cassirer went to Britain in 1934 and taught at Glasgow University. At the age of thirty, even before going to Britain, he was recognized as an authority on Aristotle. When he became a permanent faculty member at Glasgow University in 1946, he became in his own right an authority on Kant's philosophy. At the age of 50, he says he had "no knowledge whatever of religious problems nor any interest in them. My sole preoccupation was with philosophical questions."³⁴ For some inexplicable reason, when he was fifty years old Cassirer began to read the Apostle Paul. He was immediately impressed with Paul's moral insights and understanding of the relationship between law and grace. Cassirer also admits that he had grown dissatisfied with the pretensions of reason which he thinks typically characterize the writings of philosophers.

While philosophy is supposed on all sides to be a purely rational activity, relying upon the intellect and the intellect alone, without ever allowing

itself to be swayed by any personal or emotional bias, there remains this disturbing fact: Utterly different conclusions are reached by various thinkers, each philosopher arguing with great vehemence and ingenuity in favor of the position he wishes to uphold, while yet the possibility is wholly excluded that agreement might be reached between him and his opponents. This, of course, raises the crucial problem whether any such thing as a reliable criterion of truth is available within the compass of philosophical thinking at all. So far as I could see, no satisfactory solution had ever been offered.³⁵

In the light of the impasse which reason was locked into, he wondered "whether the intellect was really a suitable instrument for dealing with the fundamental problems of existence."³⁶

At the age of 56, Cassirer was baptized and wrote a treatise on Paul, Kant and the Hebrew prophets, which he called *Grace and Law*. At the conclusion of his book, he explains his reasons for coming to accept the Christian faith. It was because of the moral, life-changing message of the grace of God of which Paul was a powerful witness. "As for myself, I may explain here that, if I have come to embrace the Christian religion, this has been almost wholly due to the impression made upon me not only by St. Paul's teaching but by his personality as it reveals itself in his epistles."³⁷ He goes on to say "there is only one way a human being can become his or her true self, and that is by making a complete surrender to Christ."³⁸

Is it really possible to conclusively prove that the Christian faith is true? Cassirer writes:

I am, of course, fully aware that nothing that has been said may serve to establish either that Jesus Christ is the Son of God or that he appeared to St. Paul on the road to Damascus. Yet, as I have remarked before, I myself have no doubt that St. Paul is right on both counts. This is largely because the impression I have formed of St. Paul is that he was the very last man to fall victim to self-deception and because, in consequence, I find it impossible to entertain seriously the idea that his spiritual pilgrimage had a hallucinatory experience for its starting point.³⁹

I suspect that Heinz Cassirer's testimony would smack of sheer subjectivity for Mackie. But at least Cassirer gave the biblical documents a serious study and the overall body of evidence persuaded him that faith in Christ is reasonably based in objective truth. The point is, Mackie professes atheism and the basis of his decision involves more factors than he is willing to admit. Our choices about the meaning of life, or its lack of meaning, are never purely rationalistic and intellectualistic, as Cassirer accurately points out.

The foundational issues of life are not decided by reasoning deductively or

non-deductively, as important as both types of reasoning are. The decision of truth is finally arrived at through dialectic/dialogical thinking. Out of the conversations of both private and public life, of both practical and academic life, do the attitudes we develop about trust, unity, meaning and purpose take shape. The decisive issue is not simply having a grasp of the larger body of evidence, but the attitudes which we bring to that larger body of evidence. Mackie fails to consider this larger epistemic dimension of reason which includes values, feelings, emotions and attitudes.

Mackie presumes too much when he thinks he proves that God does not exist. Hence he calls it a miracle that any should believe. T. H. Huxley, the father of modern agnosticism, very much disliked theologians who thought they could prove God's existence, but even more distasteful to Huxley were the philosophers who were atheists: "Of all the senseless babble I have ever had occasion to read, the demonstrations of these philosophers who undertake to tell us all about the nature of God would be the worst, if they were not surpassed by the still greater absurdities of the philosophers who try to prove that there is no God."⁴⁰

Though Hume did not try to prove atheism, he did reduce knowledge to feeling or sentiment. The guide to life, he says, is custom established by our natural instincts and feelings, not reason.⁴¹ Rational reflection would immobilize us completely in the clutches of skepticism "were not nature too strong for us," Hume observes.⁴² Hume inconsistently uses reason to show that reason is not our guide in life!

Bertrand Russell, a religious agnostic, says that Hume's skepticism was "insincere," because having undermined reason he then appealed to reason for developing his own interpretation of the world.⁴³ Hume was prepared to say that we do not really know anything—not even the real physical world beyond our senses. It is difficult to argue with a skeptic because they make no real claims to knowledge. The only way that Mackie can be consistent on this point is to be a skeptic, but instead he is an avowed atheist.

Mackie does not follow Hume's reasoning to this final conclusion. Nowhere does Mackie propose that our guide to life is a custom which is grounded in passion and feeling as opposed to reason. Nor does he suggest that he embraces a skeptical attitude about our claims to knowledge. For Hume, reason exposes the uncertainties and ambiguities of our understanding of life which would propel us into the abyss of "Pyrrhonism" if our natural instincts and feelings did not override our rational reflection.⁴⁴ But Mackie assumes that reason is our guide to life which frees us from skepticism and enables us to reject a religious perspective on life altogether.

I suspect that Hume, despite Mackie's attempt to be a modern restatement of Hume's epistemic sensationalism, would not take too kindly to this misappropriation of his thought. I say this because on one occasion when Hume was din-

ing with the *philosophes* of Paris, he caustically remarked that he didn't believe in the existence of atheists. Baron d'Holbach replied to Hume that he had been most unfortunate and that now he was surrounded by seventeen atheists.⁴⁵ The point of Hume's comment was that any alleged atheist is claiming to know more than what is possible for the human mind to reasonably conclude. Both the atheism of his Paris friends and their commitment to a mechanistic explanation of the universe were more than Hume believed could be rationally proved.

Apparently Mackie thinks he has developed the logic of Hume's philosophical sensationalism more consistently than his mentor, but it is far from clear that the whole body of evidence which Mackie embraces for himself proves his atheistic conclusion. Russell may be right when he accuses Hume of being "insincere" in his attack on reason's ability to demonstrate the truth of anything, but Mackie is virtually uncritical and deadly serious about reason's ability to prove his atheistic perspective. There is hardly a tinge of even a mild form of skepticism in Mackie's philosophical point of view! It is apparent that theists aren't the only ones who sometimes surrender to dogmatism!

Mackie also briefly alludes to three other sources for explaining the nature of religion—Feuerbach, Marx and Freud.⁴⁶ These three sources are perhaps more widely used as a basis for embracing the atheistic position than Hume, perhaps because they are more clearly atheistic in their thinking than was Hume, as well as the fact that their writings are more widely known. Feuerbach's idea of God as a projection of human ideals was a significant landmark in the history of atheism because he was the first to offer a genuinely philosophical justification for modern atheism. To be sure, modern atheism originated in the development of modern natural science and its mechanistic interpretation of the world provided by the eighteenth century French materialists.⁴⁷ Marx's socio-economic interpretation of religion has also been widely influential. But Freud's psychological analysis of religion as compensation for repressed complexes and unconscious wishes has given atheism a broad basis of acceptance, even though Feuerbach's analysis is generally recognized to be more philosophically persuasive.⁴⁸ Each of these interpretations has been briefly incorporated into Mackie's thought with little critical examination, and he limits the possible sources of religion to these social, economic and psychological factors as they have been observed in the so-called natural history of religion, as Hume termed it in his writings, as opposed to a supernatural history of revelation.

IS GOD-TALK NEUROTIC?

Mackie thinks it strange that so many religious people draw from psychology and its insights into human emotion as support for theism.⁴⁹ It surely seems fair to say that Mackie is uncomfortable with the role which emotion and feeling play in our perception of truth. This is illustrated in his assessment of Nietzsche's style of atheism. He thinks that Nietzsche's terminology, "God is

dead," is a "silly" concept.⁵⁰ Mackie apparently fails to realize the depth of human feeling concerning the reality of God. Nietzsche's dramatic question, "Is God dead? Where has God gone?" reflects the emotional loss which modern atheism embraces. Mackie's rather emotionally casual and nonchalant examination of God's existence portrays that, for him, not much of a positive value is really at stake if God doesn't exist.

Though he is quite sure that psychological factors are the ultimate source of religions, the tables can be turned and it could be argued that atheistic theories are faith-systems as well and are also merely a psychological compensation for reducing neurotic stress. At least Karl Jung so interpreted Freud's atheism and his concept of the Oedipus Complex as a rationalization for Freud's own neurotic fears.⁵¹ Certainly Mackie's need to refute theism and defend atheism could be open to such a psychological analysis, even as he has accused religious people of the need to mask their own fears. Harvard psychologist, Gordon Allport, cautioned that "those who find the religious principle of life illusory would do well not to scrutinize their own working principles too closely."⁵² It certainly seems extremely strange, that if religion is merely based on fantasy and is so irrational, that it would generate such a lifelong obsession and require such a serious, scholarly refutation as Mackie provides. Gordon Allport has shown that religion can be an important aspect of developing a mature personality. He writes: "A man's religion is the audacious bid he makes to bind himself to creation and to the Creator. It is his ultimate attempt to enlarge and to complete his own personality by finding the supreme context in which he rightly belongs."⁵³ In this respect, it can be argued that Mackie's atheism is his own personal religious attempt to provide a sense of meaning and purpose to his own life. It is inevitable that one will attempt to locate his/her own individuality within the larger context of reality. Whether or not one can experience a sense of peace and security with the denial of any larger meaningful context is exactly the question which everybody must decide for oneself. Mackie may be perfectly content without a larger meaningful context, but this lack of unity and meaning is the essence of nihilism. Mackie simply asserts that goodness and value are inherently human.⁵⁴ He has no further need to ask why this is so. He also refuses to feel the nihilistic implications of his atheism.

What is also a glaring omission in Mackie's use of Hume's philosophy, as noted above, is that he completely ignores Hume's claim to be a skeptic. There is not a large difference between Hume's skepticism and Nietzsche's nihilism—except that the latter expresses a depth of feeling about the loss of certainty and meaning of the world which is suppressed in skepticism. Hume writes of his own philosophy: "By all that has been said the reader will easily perceive that the philosophy contained in this book is very skeptical and tends to give us a notion of the imperfections and narrow limits of human understanding. Almost all reasoning is there reduced to experience, and the belief which attends experience is

explained to be nothing but a peculiar sentiment or lively conception produced by habit."⁵⁵ Mackie's appropriation of Hume's philosophy stops short of embracing his skepticism, but he has simply exchanged it for a narrow dogmatism.

Mackie denies he is a nihilist, but without a larger context of meaning to which he can relate his life, it would certainly seem that he is a nihilist whether he recognizes it or not. Toward the end of his life, Nietzsche wrote: "That I have been basically a nihilist is something that I have only recently come to admit."⁵⁶ Nietzsche's slow admission of his nihilism leads him to say that "it seems impossible that 'aimlessness in itself' should be the basis of our faith."⁵⁷ Nietzsche seems to admit here that a pure nihilism is really impossible from the standpoint of consistency. Being the logician that Mackie is, he certainly could not embrace nihilism without feeling the contradiction. Yet, if atheism is the final word—that God is absent and that no larger reason for the meaning of the universe can be had—there can be no effective philosophical defense against nihilism! Hans Kung, while recognizing that all atheists are not necessarily nihilists, made this point in his book, *Does God Exist?*⁵⁸ and Mackie was particularly annoyed by it.⁵⁹

Nietzsche's atheism at least catches the depth of human feeling and thinking in contrast to Mackie's too comfortable refutation of belief in God. This is not to say that Mackie should not be taken seriously. Indeed, his considerations are worthy and respectable. But his conclusions are too hasty and too sweeping to be considered a final blow to religious experience.

Among other reasons why Mackie's atheism is not convincing is that he shows little awareness of the existential feeling which Tillich calls the "abysmal" depth of reality.⁶⁰ The feeling that we are strung out over the abyss is not necessarily a pathological, psychological state of mind. It defines our ontological situation. Neurotic fears are irrational diversions which distract our attention from the real source of our anxieties. Ideologies and doctrines, even if they are atheistic ideologies and doctrines, can be rationalizations to hide our neurotic insecurities. These anxieties may be relieved through therapy, but the existential anxiety of meaninglessness and nothingness cannot be cured—though it may be covered up and denied in neurotic rationalizations.

In further developing the nihilism of Nietzsche, the continental existentialists are certainly insightful in pinpointing the consequence of a world without God. Can atheism be taken seriously without the depth of feeling which nihilism entails? Any atheism which denies the implications of nihilism as its consequence is emotionally shallow. For it fails to come to terms with the anxiety of meaninglessness. If the history of religions proves anything, it proves that the feeling of aloneness and emptiness is a universal feeling which pushes one to try to come to terms with the ultimate meaning and purpose of the universe. This emotional need for a satisfying relationship with the larger meaning of the universe is essentially a religious need. To acknowledge this psychological need is not to explain away religious experience. It is to recognize, as did Augustine,

that we were intended to have a relationship with God and that we cannot find peace and rest in the world until we find peace and rest in God.

There can be no emotionally fulfilling relationships and human happiness in the truest sense of the term in our world apart from this religious dimension. It is this religious perception which universally stamps the pages of human history. It does not seem reasonable to conclude that this universal cry of the human heart for the warmth of divine love and protection can be explained away as merely infantile and mere wishful thinking. Such a conclusion resembles more of a denial of our existential needs than a genuine openness to our need for reality and truth. To be sure, this existential need in itself does not prove the existence of a personal God. Nor can it be used to justify any particular religious belief. But it is a rationally significant factor for recognizing the validity of the religious dimension in reality.

C. S. Lewis writes: "Creatures are not born with desires unless satisfaction for those desires exists." If we are cold, there is warmth which we seek. If we are thirsty, there is water to satisfy our thirst. If we are tired, there is rest for our bodies. If we desire fellowship and unity beyond what this world can offer, "the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing."⁶¹

Mackie gives considerable attention to William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*. James believes his studies of first-hand reports, both published and unpublished, show that the origin of religious experience is more than self-suggestion. Mackie rejects this conclusion. Instead he offers a psychological explanation which draws upon Hume's idea that fear is the origin of religion.⁶²

It may well be that fear is a motivation for people becoming religious. But what is fear? Since the rise of psychoanalysis, we have been made aware of the more precise distinction between fear and anxiety (dread). Fear is an emotional response to a specific danger, whereas anxiety (dread) is an emotional response to a more diffused and uncertain danger. The classic treatise on anxiety is found in Kierkegaard's writings, but Tillich's *The Courage to Be* provides a helpful and insightful discussion in which he distinguished between existential anxiety and neurotic anxiety.⁶³ Existential anxiety is the universal condition of our finite existence as we feel threatened by guilt, meaninglessness and finally death. Unfortunately, Mackie does not pursue this distinction between fear and the various kinds of anxieties.

Presumably Hume thought fear was a universal emotion in reaction to our need for safety and security. He apparently had in mind a pathological definition of fear which is inhibiting and destructive of human personality. Hume's life was apparently free of these neurotic tendencies according to his own account. He described himself as a man of "mild disposition" and "an open,

social, cheerful humor."⁶⁴ Did Hume feel a sense of existential anxiety as he considered the larger meaning of life in general? Apparently not. Shortly before his death, he composed a "funeral oration" of himself.⁶⁵ The "ruling passion" of his life was "literary fame," though he says his disappointment of not achieving it "never soured my temper."⁶⁶

It is apparent that Mackie likewise did not feel the existential anxieties associated with our finitude. Certainly that he rejected nihilism would seem to indicate that he felt free of these anxious feelings. In fact, many intellectual people disclaim any awareness of existential anxiety and feelings of estrangement. Many well-educated people simply enjoy a comfortable kind of pragmatism without the slightest hint of being plagued with the kind of existential anxiety and despair which Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre, Camus and Tillich wrote about.

Even though many American and British people do not feel the existential despair (as opposed to a neurotic despair) which arises out of our finiteness, this does not in itself mean that it isn't there. In fact, it could be thought that the denial of any feeling of existential anxiety may be symptomatic of an undiagnosed neurotic fear. But, of course, even when people admit their existential anxiety, they will not necessarily become theists. Quite the contrary, the continental European existentialists developed atheism directly in response to their awareness of existential anxiety. In their case, atheism was consciously developed in response to the emotion of fear (dread).⁶⁷

Are we to conclude, then, that existentialist atheism is discredited because it was intentionally developed out of an attempt to come to terms with the emotion of fear? If we follow the thinking of Mackie—who concluded that theism is invalidated because it arose as an attempt to resolve the emotion of fear—then we ought to conclude that atheism can also be so discredited!

Mackie refines Hume's theory by incorporating Freud's interpretation of religion. Mackie writes: "Religion expresses and seems to fulfill very strong and persistent wishes, both conscious and unconscious, and that the believer's supposed relation to God (or the gods) is significantly like that of a child to its parents, and is probably influenced by the adult's memory of that relation, will hardly be disputed."⁶⁸ Mackie's uncritical acceptance of Freud's view of religion as a universal obsessional neurosis is surprising, to say the least. For, despite the enormous influence of Freud in the modern world and the significant amount of pioneering work which he did in psychology, his views, and especially his religious views, have not been followed uncritically even by his own students.

Karl Jung was Freud's most distinguished student, and Freud had wanted him to be his successor.⁶⁹ They enjoyed a close friendship for a time until Freud abruptly broke with Jung over the issue of religion.⁷⁰ Jung frankly says that "Freud himself had a neurosis, no doubt diagnoseable and one with highly troublesome symptoms."⁷¹ He in particular believed that at the core of Freud's neuro-

sis was his denial of the religious aspects of his own personal existence.⁷² As evidence of his neurosis, one biographer of Karl Jung reports that Freud wanted a "son" himself (Jung). This was seen in the way that Freud had a strong need for Jung to accept his views. Freud fainted twice when Jung expressed disagreement with Freud over the "death wish."⁷³ This biographer also observes that the relationship between his theory of the Oedipus Complex and his own life was not obvious to Freud.⁷⁴

Among the hundreds of patients that sought out Jung, he observed that a key factor in their anxiety disorders was a loss of faith and religious experience. He also observed that their recovery was directly related to their ability to once again experience the meaning of their lost religious faith.⁷⁵

Paul Vitz, a psychologist from New York University, recently has argued that atheism is an "unconscious Oedipal wish-fulfillment....that comes from the very center of Freudian theory."⁷⁶ Unlike Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus Complex, Vitz suggested that atheism can be the result of those who reject God as their Father because of their desire to kill their own fathers. In fact, Vitz shows that Freud's dislike of his own earthly father was highly influential in the development of Freud's atheism. Not religion, but atheism is an obsessional neurosis!⁷⁷ Freud's attack on religion was thus a projection of his own neurosis.

One widely known and respected Neo-Freudian was Karen Horney. While retaining what she considered the "fundamentals of Freud's teachings," she disagreed with Freud's view that neurosis can be explained as a compulsive, instinctive drive aimed at satisfaction. Rather, disturbed human relationships are the cause of anxiety disorders.⁷⁸ Horney describes one of the symptoms of disturbed human relationships as the need to "move away from people." This is the need to be excessively self-sufficient, detached, and totally adequate in oneself. One of its primary symptoms is the inability to involve oneself in commitment and trust.⁷⁹

A British psychoanalyst, Frank Lake, has also written extensively on this anxiety disorder. He calls it the schizoid position.⁸⁰ The schizoid position is distrustful of feeling and emotion in general. It suppresses all feelings—hate, love, joy, sadness.⁸¹ Scorn also characterizes schizoid behavior.⁸² Lake notes that Freud was unable to recognize existential anxiety because "he did not regard dependence on personal sources outside the self as the prerequisite of a truly human being." Lake believes Freud's own neurosis was of the schizoid type.⁸³

The opposite of the need "to move away from others" reflected in the schizoid position in what Horney calls the need of "moving toward people."⁸⁴ This is typical of the hysterical/compliant person who clings to others because of a compulsory need to be liked and receive affection in an indiscriminate fashion.⁸⁵ These two attitudes reflect the basic positions of those who suffer from neurotic anxiety. The schizoid/self-sufficient/private person distrusts feeling because feelings put one in a dependent relationship upon others.⁸⁶ In contrast to

Oriental philosophy, which prizes detachment as a means of spiritual achievement, neurotic detachment is not a choice, but is an inner compulsion.⁸⁷ Horney further points out that the most striking need for the neurotic detached person is for self-sufficiency and its most positive expression is resourcefulness.⁸⁸

Blaise Pascal recognized this resourcefulness of some philosophers who seek to defend themselves against the commitment of faith. Their intellectualist defenses protect their minds from the inner truth about themselves. The philosophers, he says, have turned away from the lust of sensory pleasure and the lust of power for the lust of knowledge; they are unable to have faith in what lies beyond them and so they substitute faith in their own reason. Pascal says the philosopher encourages us to find rest in ourselves. But Pascal says this cannot produce inner rest. It only comes from a commitment to God who is the source of reason and truth.⁸⁹ In light of Pascal's emphasis on the warmth of divine fellowship, it is not surprising that Mackie is so predisposed against him.⁹⁰

Kierkegaard also knew the inadequacy of finite reason and our inability to experience true meaning from within ourselves apart from commitment to a personal God. His own writings grew out of the laboratory of his life. He knew from experience the commitment anxiety of the schizoid position. As Lake observes, apart from Kierkegaard's commitment to the God revealed in Jesus Christ who sustained him, he could not have been so open and so forthright in the insights of mental suffering. Lake writes: "A primary characteristic of affliction and despair is its attempt to remain hidden. Precisely those who suffer most from it most wish to hide it....even from oneself."⁹¹

Why are people afflicted with the schizoid position? According to psychoanalytic theory, it is the result of a catastrophic splitting of the person in the earliest weeks and months of one's life. It is usually associated with the loss of a significant person's face as mother. It begins where the union with mother is lost. The schizoid is one who can't trust in the "out there" because they have no early memory of a secure world centered in a source person who came to answer them in their time of need. They also tend to be contemptuous of those who do believe in the "out there."⁹²

Psychoanalytic studies show that this neurotic dread is driven underground because it is intolerable to the conscious mind. Dread is the insecure feeling of living in an isolated world where you are the only object. In the hysterical-emotional person, this fear causes the person to cling to others; in the retreating-intellectual person, this fear causes people to detach themselves from dependency on others and they develop a sense of self-sufficiency and are quite resourceful in constructing a meaningful world all of their own.

For many years medical science assumed that the nervous system of a baby was too undeveloped for memories of birth and of the earliest months of life to be recorded in the brain. But since the 1950s, the psychiatric use of abreactive drug therapy has shown just how vividly the earliest events of life are imprinted

on the mind. Patients literally were able to relive the trauma of birth and the damaging experience of suffocation as they were pushed through the birth canal. Other patients have been able to relive, through abreactive drug therapy, the earliest hours immediately following their birth, and memories of abandonment, isolation, and human coldness often have been the experience of those infants who later became afflicted with commitment-anxiety.⁹³

Lake, who has done extensive clinical work with schizoid persons, believes that the bitter memories of unloving faces and stern voices at the time of birth "are the beginnings of man's distortion of the truth about the ultimate personal reality, God Himself." With rare insight, Lake shows that "this is where the lie is first told about God, the lie which bedevils humanity, which determines our solidarity with the race in ignorance, pride, fear, anxiety, despair, idolatry and lust, unbelief and murderous hatred of God Himself."⁹⁴

If relationships at home have been developed in an appropriate fashion, the foundation for the development of one's own ideas and beliefs has been laid. But when this foundation has been cracked by poor relationships, the child learns to relate to the outside world either by clinging to others or by detaching oneself from others. Undoubtedly many people have a clinging and panic-driven relationship to God. They often speak of their relationship to God in highly emotional and affective terms. They may even give the appearance of being super-spiritual, which is usually compensation for feelings of insecurity.

Detaching oneself from others is a commitment-anxiety disorder which also may have religious implications; it is the attempt to protect ourselves from being hurt by creating distance from others. The affliction of dread is seen particularly in intellectual people who are especially resourceful in creating a world of conceptuality which "promises protection from experience" and requires no obligations to others.⁹⁵ The special difficulty of someone suffering from anxiety-commitment is the failure to feel the presence and love of God as a caring heavenly Father. This person finds it difficult to *feel* because he or she is locked into a world of protective *reason*.

This is the neurotic position most typical of intellectual people, as Lake has shown. The hysterical\clinging person desires a person-centered universe which will guarantee security and safety. But the schizoid position has no need for such a personal universe. As Lake puts it, "The craving is for an order based on *anything but* dependence on others. Since all that has been offered by available persons amounts, not to an ordered world, but to chaos, the ego takes refuge in a order based on its own cogitations."⁹⁶ Lake identifies the existentialist theologians, Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich, as representative of the schizoid position because of their attitude of distrust toward the historical foundation of Christian faith and their impersonal view of God.⁹⁷ Lake shows that St. Paul's warnings against inflated intellectualism and gnostic speculation, in the first letter to the Corinthians and the Colossian letters, are directed at the kinds of

defenses typical of the schizoid position. Lake writes:

The gnostic's view of ordinary Christians and indeed of the Biblical record itself is that of the superior person. He assumes he knows better than the record of the witnesses because he always feels his own independent mental aristocracy as an endowment which must take precedence over mere evidence in the objective world. Gnostics show disdain, and not a little bitterness, towards them. This reveals something of the secret scorn of themselves in which they were driven. It conceals and denies their deep envy of warm human ties, against the acceptance of which their life is in recoil.⁹⁸

One example of scorn and distrust is reflected in a debate on theism/atheism which took place on the campus of the University of Mississippi in 1988 in which two of the several participants were J. P. Moreland and Antony Flew. Flew is an analytical philosopher whose sympathies are with the logical empiricist and their verification theory of truth. J. P. Moreland is a Christian theist who bases his faith on the historical revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in the New Testament. Moreland, having already argued a careful and reasoned defense of theism, gave personal testimony to his faith in Christ in a warm and loving manner. Flew's response was: "Moreland's appeal to his 'personal experiences' strikes me as absolutely grotesque."⁹⁹ This inability to respect the witness of someone else, along with the scornful expression of a superior attitude, bear all the marks of the schizoid position which psychoanalysts describe. It is one thing not to be persuaded by someone's testimony, but it is quite another matter to brush aside someone's personal experience with an air of arrogance and condescension. The suppression of warm feelings is typical of the schizoid position.

Herbert Butterfield, the internationally respected Cambridge historian, describes the excessive skepticism of some scholars toward biblical history as reflecting a kind of "intellectual arrogance" which in any field of research reduces "clarity of the mind."¹⁰⁰ One cannot generalize and say that anyone who rejects the witness of the apostles concerning their faith in Jesus Christ is schizoid, but the excessive and biased attitude of some scholars toward biblical history may be accounted for in such a manner.

This observation may not be taken well by some, but it is usually skeptics like Hume and atheists like Mackie who first bring up this neurotic explanation. Mackie thus concludes that the central doctrines of theism "cannot be rationally defended."¹⁰¹ He agrees with Hume that "our most holy religion....is founded on (irrational fear) *faith*, not on reason."¹⁰² And he insists, along with Hume and Freud, that this irrational faith is the product of fear and an irrational wish-fulfillment.

Now I am not saying that all atheists are neurotics. My point is that if one is going to use the Humean and Freudian argument that faith is the product of

neurosis, then the argument also can be made against atheism. I agree with Kai Nielsen, who says he knows both atheists and Christians who are neurotics, and he knows both atheists and Christians who are perfectly normal and sane.¹⁰³ In the final analysis, the truth of theism or atheism must be decided on grounds other than psychoanalytic interpretations.

IS GOD-TALK ETHICAL?

Mackie's surprisingly negative attitude toward Jesus of Nazareth is remarkably uninformed and biased. He particularly takes exception to the "widely supposed" notion that "Christian morality is particularly admirable."¹⁰⁴ He interprets the Old Testament morality without qualifications as barbaric and savage. He accuses Jesus of engaging in harsh and unloving behavior in contradiction to his own preaching on love.¹⁰⁵ He portrays Jesus' own ethic as being irrational and opposed to knowledge.¹⁰⁶

He rejects Jesus' ethic to love our neighbor as ourselves because this is only a "fantasy."¹⁰⁷ The neurotic connotation of this term, widely used in psychoanalytic writings, can hardly be overlooked. Of course there are neurotic religious fantasies associated with perfectionistic symptoms among some Christian people. But what Mackie fails to understand is the transforming grace of God which Jesus reveals. Of course we can't love the way Jesus taught us to do so without his help. It's impossible. But through a relationship with Jesus, whose will is one with God, we can come to love like Jesus loved and taught us to love. And this is no fantasy, but the healthy-minded lifestyle of a mature person reflected in 1 Corinthians 13, as the psychoanalyst, Karen Horney, also observed.¹⁰⁸

Patrick Sherry wrote a philosophical treatise on belief in God. His book was called, *Spirit, Saints, and Immortality*. His main point is that the decisive objective proof for God's existence revealed through Jesus of Nazareth is the lives of the saints, that is, anyone who is a genuine follower of Jesus Christ and has been transformed by his Spirit. What he argues is that if there is a God like Jesus proclaimed, the rationally convincing element is the witness of persons transformed by faith in Christ.¹⁰⁹ Unfortunately, Mackie's focus is almost exclusively upon the evidence of miracles as a basis for confirming or disconfirming faith in God rather than on the personal character and moral integrity of the lives of Christian people.

It is certainly true that many believers have not exemplified the moral ideal of love, as Mackie so rightly accuses.¹¹⁰ But for those believers who consistently practice the presence of God through daily devotional habits and corporate acts of public worship, the grace-filled life of Jesus Christ will daily transform them into his own moral image.

Mackie is right to this extent—if there is no transforming power in the teaching and life of Jesus with whom believers claim to have a personal relationship, then the God of Jesus does not exist. That's the bottom line. Unfortunately

Mackie's brief survey of some who claim to know God through miracles and visions is focusing on the wrong kind of evidence. Even Jesus discredited those who would believe simply because of alleged miracles and signs (Matt. 12:39). The final proof of genuine faith is the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23). Jesus said others will know who are his disciples by their fruit (John 13:35).

Nowhere in the Bible are we led to think that faith (trust) in God arises from an abstract, scholarly, academic, and ironclad proof of a miracle. Nowhere in the New Testament documents is there any sensational display of miracles like a magician would perform on stage. Biblical miracles are intended to bring redemption to the world, not to entertain. C. S. Lewis rightly limits the function of physical miracles to extremely restricted situations which serve the larger cause of the missionary situation of the Church.¹¹¹ Not physical miracles, but the holiness of believers is the final proof of God's existence. And holiness means essentially loving God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself. Without this transforming power of the grace of God mediated through Jesus, claims to know God would be meaningless and groundless. Holiness is primary; miracles are secondary!

If Karen Horney has shown from the standpoint of psychoanalytic studies that neurotic fear is rooted in the failure of human relationships,¹¹² the Bible shows that the first negative human emotion to surface after our first parents broke fellowship with God was fear—they were afraid and hid themselves (Gen. 3:10). The purpose of the grace of God throughout the history of salvation which culminated in Jesus Christ was to produce within human beings the love of God which would bring harmony and understanding among all people. This is why the apostle John says that perfect love casts out fear. He says specifically that there is no fear in love because the love of Christ indwells us and we can love each other as God loves us (1 John 4:17-18).

If there is any ethic as admirable, as ennobling, as excellent, if there is any piece of literature that is comparable in its lofty, person-affirming ethic, if there is any available resource to change the character and life of any person into a new, truly fulfilled individual, if there is any bond of love which will unite a fragmented world into a just and holy people besides the gospel of grace offered in Jesus Christ, it has not been observed anywhere else in the history of the world. This is why Rudolf Bultmann, who is certainly no friend to traditional theism or orthodox Christianity, says frankly that there can be no true human fulfillment and personal authenticity apart from faith in Christ. Why? He says the question is not if this kind of authentic existence can be discovered somewhere else; in point of fact, he says, this type of qualitative existence has never been discovered apart from faith in Christ. He particularly notes that Heidegger's philosophy of existence is entirely dependent on the Christian faith of Kierkegaard and Paul.¹¹³ Even the neo-Marxist philosopher, Ernst Bloch,

admits that atheists are able to survive with a degree of meaning in life because they live off "the borrowed credit credit" of religious faith.¹¹⁴ The contribution of the Christian view of personhood to the modern world is widely acknowledged also among secular psychologist and moral development theorists.¹¹⁵ I believe it could be argued that atheism without the benefit of Christian faith would relapse us into the paganism of nature religions. In this respect, modern atheism is really a Christian heresy and cannot survive on its own.

IS GOD-TALK IMMORAL?

Mackie reasons that it is logically incoherent to affirm that God is all-powerful and all good since evil exists.¹¹⁶ Such a God who permitted evil would presumably be immoral himself. Here again the attitudinal\feeling dimension comes into play. The believer, while recognizing the dilemma, trusts that there is a reason why God allows evil. Faith acknowledges that we do not have a completely satisfactory reason yet, but in the future of God's kingdom beyond the obscurity of this life we will know. For now, logic can only take us so far in pointing out the compatibility of divine sovereignty and evil in the world. The best of the arguments to explain the connection between God and evil is the free-will defense. It maintains that God chose to limit his sovereignty when he created human beings in his image. The possibility of evil is corollary to the fact of finite freedom. This helps us to understand something of the logical problem. For there is no possibility of finite freedom and the development of personal responsibility without the possibility of evil.

Yet what is disturbing from the Christian point of view is the existential feeling that there is too much evil rampant in the world for a good, almighty God to permit. This is not a logical argument as such. It is strictly an intuitive perception that pointless and irredeemable evil blocks one's ability to believe in God. Who hasn't felt this sense of distaste about God permitting the excessive, gratuitous evil which allows the suffering and killing of innocent infants and children. Today I listened to the confession of a 15-year-old girl who had been raped repeatedly by her father before she ran away from home. Outrage! Anger! Why God? If God is so good and so powerful, what is the point of permitting innocent children to be abused sexually?

Several years ago I was a chaplain's assistant in a medical center. I was on call with my beeper when I was summoned to the emergency room. When I arrived, several doctors and a number of nurses were surrounding the body of an automobile accident victim. One of the doctors "sliced" him open, reached inside to physically massage his heart in a last, frantic attempt to save his life—all to no avail. I had the responsibility of informing the family in the waiting room of his death. He was 29 years of age and had two small children. I soon learned that his wife had been killed in an automobile wreck the previous year. What could I tell the grieving sisters, brother, father, mother and two small children? What sense

would it make to tell them that God loved and cared for them? None! Would a free-will theodicy comfort them? Hardly! Incomprehensible suffering calls into question the concept of a caring God.

Someone once told me about an answered prayer that God had provided the financial means for them to afford medical insurance. Why would God provide for the medical insurance of one person and yet not intervene to save the life of a father injured in a car wreck? Also ironically, this same person who obtained medical insurance later developed terminal cancer. Supposedly God provided medical insurance so he could die from cancer without incurring astronomical costs to him and his family. This terminally ill patient apparently never felt the contradiction of his situation. I did. Perhaps I felt the irony of the situation because I wasn't the one involved in the suffering. Perhaps the intense suffering of the human soul creates a kind of spiritual perception which is not normally apparent. I could have scoffed inwardly at the naiveté of this patient, but then perhaps the joke was on me and my spiritual blindness. Who was I to pass judgment on the providence (or lack of it) of God?

Wolfhart Pannenberg was asked in a forum at Asbury Theological Seminary about his resolution of the problem of suffering and the Christian concept of a caring God, especially in the light of the holocaust.

Pannenberg replied by quoting from a Jewish author who said that after Auschwitz no one can talk about God any longer. Pannenberg then remarked: "I always felt that you can say that only if you are in a position of watching a tragedy in theater. You cannot say that, if you think of yourself in the place of those who had to go into the gas ovens, because those who had to walk that way had their only hope in singing psalms....The power to deal with experiences like that is not in simply observing them in others, but if one has to go through them oneself....The moment you believe in God you get hold of the *only* power that enables you face experiences of terror like that."¹¹⁷

The problem of suffering, Moltmann says, is theodicy's open question.¹¹⁸ There is no final solution to the problem—either for the theist or atheist. There is no final answer to it, yet one cannot get rid of this nagging question—why evil? For the believer it is an eschatological question. Pannenberg points out that this problem will persist "until the last day." He maintains "this issue will be definitively solved, not by our theoretical arguments, but only by the action of God Himself in the future of His Kingdom."¹¹⁹

The question, as E. L. Mascall has pointed out, is not whether God created the best of all possible worlds. Leibniz made a strong logical case for this position in the eighteenth century in his *Theodicy*. The issue simply is that this is the world God freely chose to create. God is infinite and his ways and reasons for doing things are not entirely comprehensible to us. God is ultimately a mystery because he is infinite wisdom and he transcends our finite, limited capacity for knowing.¹²⁰ Shall the clay say to the potter, why did you make me like this?

(Rom. 9:20). This does not at all mean that one can hide behind the excuse of mystery and duck the hard intellectual questions. Indeed they are to be faced with honesty and candor. But finite reason can only take us so far in developing a thoughtful understanding of our faith. Reason requires us to admit that the incomprehensive suffering of the world does call into question, from an existential/emotional standpoint, the existence of God.

In Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan challenges his brother Alyosha:

"Tell me," said Ivan earnestly, "I challenge you—answer. Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny creature—a baby....would you consent to be the architect on those conditions? Tell me, and tell the truth." "No, I wouldn't consent," said Alyosha softly.¹²¹

In the final analysis, the problem of evil poses insurmountable evidence against faith in God—except for one fact of history which disarms the attack of our emotional and rational arguments. Taylor Caldwell has described this fact with therapeutic and theological insight in a book, *The Listener*, where she describes a number of persons who pour out their souls to a man behind a curtain. Eventually these people come to a point of honesty in talking about their grief and problems and complain bitterly against the universe. At that point, the curtain opens and they see the Author of the universe, not standing idly by in complacency, but crucified upon the Cross.

IS GOD-TALK HISTORICALLY DERIVED?

It is apparent that Mackie did not know of the development of historical criticism in biblical studies when he wrote: "Although Christianity is said to be a historical religion, the 'historical' claims (especially about the life of Christ) are not treated as historical, because believers do not apply to them the sort of doubt which would ordinarily apply to historical statements about any fairly remote epoch."¹²² What is also apparent is that Mackie does not know that the development of modern critical history took its rise from within Christian theology and critical biblical studies.¹²³ And the cutting edge in contemporary theology and biblical studies has been an in-depth and probing analysis of the reliability of the historical events in the Bible.

Through the modern development of the critical historical method, the historical elements of the Bible have been subjected to the most sever and painstaking analysis of any document ever! I am reminded of a statement by C. S. Lewis who reported that, during his struggles to defend his atheism, it came as a shock when "the hardest boiled of all the atheists I ever knew sat in my room....and remarked that the evidence for the historicity of the Gospels was really surprisingly good."¹²⁴ Of course, C. S. Lewis was led to a thoughtful analysis of the historical

claims in the New Testament and became a Christian. His classic treatment of the miraculous foundation of Christian faith is contained in his book, *Miracles*. Here he deals with all the philosophical issues and concludes that the primary issue about the truth of Christian faith is historical, not merely philosophical.

The central New Testament declaration is that Jesus of Nazareth is the historical appearance and personal embodiment of God's true being. This self-revelation of God was made known by Jesus' death and resurrection. The particularity of this historical occurrence is the decisive meaning of Christian faith. Without it, Christian faith would not exist. The decisive significance of this historical event stands in sharp contrast to all other religions. Further, the Christian attitude toward the importance of historical events separates itself from all non-biblical religions which are, in essence, nature religions rather than historically-based religions. Biblical scholarship has shown that there is a central core of inter-connected events beginning with Abraham and continuing down through the formation of the nation of Israel and culminating in the history of Jesus. This series of events is called the history of salvation. This history contains a progressive unfolding, developing, and enlightening view of God which reaches its highest point in the declaration, based on his resurrection from the dead, that Jesus is the Son of God.

Of course there are many parallels and similarities between Christianity and other religions. From the early centuries of the Christian faith, both Christians and non-Christians have noted these similarities. But there are radical difference as well, and often the similarities are primarily superficial and shallow.¹²⁵ The really significant difference is the Christian attitude toward history. The Christian faith cannot survive for a moment if its historical claims can be shown to be false—or even probably false. For biblical religion places a high premium on rational evidence and reliable witnesses (see 1 Corinthians 15). If the historical nature of the apostolic claims about Jesus of Nazareth were shaky, then intellectual integrity and honesty would not allow us to believe. This stands in radical contrast to other religions for whom historical evidence is irrelevant. That is why we refer to them as having a mythological basis as opposed to the historical basis of Christian faith.

What about the historical evidence? Is it credible? F. F. Bruce, now retired professor of biblical criticism at the University of Manchester, points out that the "evidence of our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no-one dreams of questioning." He goes on to point out that "if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt." Because the New Testament is a religious document, people are naturally suspicious of its claims and "demand much more corroborative evidence for such a work than they would for an ordinary secular or pagan writing." However, Bruce points out, "It is a curious fact that historians

have often been much readier to trust the New Testament records than have many theologians." Why? Because of its reports about miracles. It is perhaps only appropriate then that the most severe test of critical analysis ought to be applied to the biblical record. Bruce writes:

But we do not quarrel with those who want more evidence for the New Testament than for other writings; firstly, because the universal claims which the New Testament makes upon mankind are so absolute, and the character and works of its chief Figure so unparalleled, that we want to be as sure of its truth as we possibly can; and secondly, because in point of fact there is much more evidence for the New Testament than for other ancient writings of comparable date.¹²⁶

To be sure, there are differing assessments among contemporary biblical scholars concerning the various historical elements in the Bible. Many claims and reports in the Bible cannot be historically confirmed or disconfirmed. But the main series of events which form the basis of the history of salvation are open to critical evaluation. It is true that some New Testament scholars do not accept many of these central events as historically reliable accounts. Most notable is Rudolf Bultmann. But at least Bultmann acknowledges that 1 Corinthians was written by Paul around 55 A.D. and that it contains materials which go back much further. He acknowledges that Paul really believes that Jesus was raised from the dead. He further acknowledged that the physical resurrection of Jesus was really believed to have happened by the earliest Christian followers.¹²⁷ Bultmann's rejection of the resurrection is based on his existentialist presupposition that assumes a fact-value dichotomy, as if empirical facts have no bearing on the ultimate meaning of life.

It is easily understandable, in the light of his espousal of the existentialist philosophy of Heidegger, that he would downgrade the importance of this historical miracle. And it is unmistakably clear that Bultmann's historical judgment was biased against the empirical, historical evidence in favor of his philosophy of existence. In this respect, Herbert Butterfield, the late professor of modern history in the University of Cambridge, noted that the historical/critical method has often "overstepped the bounds of common sense" as applied to biblical studies.¹²⁸ The excessive skepticism as applied to the New Testament documents by Bultmann led him to declare that the central events, though intended to be historical reports by the earliest Christians, are really mythological because of the supernaturalism in which they are enmeshed.¹²⁹ C. S. Lewis, one of the world's foremost scholars in mythology, comments that to him it is obvious that Bultmann does not understand the nature of myth. If the Gospels are myth, then they are the most unimaginative and poorest kinds of myths which he has ever read.¹³⁰ Lewis writes:

I myself, who first seriously read the New Testament when I was, imaginatively and poetically, all agog for the Death and Re-birth patterns [of mythical religions] and anxious to meet a corn-king, was chilled and puzzled by the almost total absence of such ideas in the Christian documents. One moment particularly stood out. A dying God—the only dying God who might possibly be historical—holds bread, that is, corn, in His hand says, “This is my body.”¹³¹

Lewis shows that the mythologically-expressed desire to enjoy fellowship with God as evidenced in all primitive religions of the world becomes a reality in the history of Jesus Christ. The decisive difference is that the God of Jesus is the God of nature and the God of history, and not a nature-god.

This historical quality permeates the biblical documents. Herbert Butterfield argues likewise for the inherently historical nature of the New Testament documents. He writes: “Of course there are some writings so clear in their integrity, and so transparent in certain respects, that within their proper realm they could almost be described as carrying their own self-ratification with them; and I think that the Gospels....must be regarded as belongs to this class.”¹³² Of course, in spite of the way that these biblical writings “authenticate themselves instantaneously in our minds,” Butterfield points out that this is not in itself a sufficient reason for accepting their accuracy from the standpoint of critical history.¹³³ Yet, the continuing developments in a critical interpretation of biblical history in the modern world further confirm its general reliability. In fact, the core events of the history of salvation are so clearly discernible historically that it is usually philosophical assumptions which produce a negative conclusion rather than the empirical evidence.

Apparently Mackie was uninformed of the intensely critical scholarship which has probed the depth of this historical question. The fact that he can speak of Jesus so unhistorically as being in the same category as Osiris, Ashtaroth, Dionysus, Baldur, Vishnu and Amida reflects how uninformed he is of critical historical matters.¹³⁴ But this failure to understand the nature of the historical quality of the Bible is common among atheists. Kail Nielsen also reflects this superficial understanding of the historical quality of Christian faith when he writes: “Why the Bible rather than the Koran? Why the Bible rather than the canonical Buddhist texts? Why the Bible rather than the Hindu texts? Why the Bible rather than the religious revelations of other people? If you look at religion anthropologically, you will see that there are thousands of religions all claiming ‘The truth.’”¹³⁵ In fact, Nielsen says plainly that he cares nothing about the historicity of Jesus. No matter what the historical evidence is, there is apparently nothing that would change his mind about the deity of Jesus.¹³⁶

One of the most probing, critical, thorough and informing analysis of the evidence for Jesus’ resurrection as reported in the New Testament documents was

made by one-time atheist, Wolfhart Pannenberg. In his book, *Jesus—God and Man*, he argues with fairness and rational objectivity for the historicity of Jesus' resurrection. In a painstaking analysis of the evidence—and in dialogue with the best of higher biblical criticism which has left no stone unturned in its comprehensive, critical analysis of the evidence—Pannenberg shows that the evidence of Jesus' resurrection from the dead is based on good historical foundations and can be understood in continuity with the view of God as developed in the history of the nation of Israel. He examined the intelligibility of the concept of the resurrection itself as it was understood in postexilic Judaism.¹³⁷

Unfortunately, the most respected atheists in the English-speaking world apparently have not critically examined the historical claims of the New Testament. Pannenberg noted, in his discussions with Antony Flew's atheism, that "there is a lack of sophistication in his way of dealing with the biblical reports."¹³⁸ Flew had argued that in the case of something so unusual as a resurrection from the dead that it required evidence considerably stronger than ordinary events which we can experience through normal means. Pannenberg agreed with his premise, and insisted that a critical examination of the evidence should be persuasive. "There are good and even superior reasons for claiming that the Resurrection of Jesus was a historical event, and consequently the risen Lord himself is a living reality."¹³⁹ Pannenberg at the same time notes that Flew has a good point that our experience reveals that dead men do not rise again. And so there is a natural resistance to even consider the evidence for Jesus' resurrection. Consequently, the debate will continue no matter what the evidence is.¹⁴⁰

It is generally assumed, especially in the European Continental discussion, that the question of critical history and its relation to Christian faith was given its classic formulation in the nineteenth century writings of Ernst Troeltsch. Actually, the modern formulation of the critical historical question also goes back to David Hume in Scotland in the eighteenth century. In *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Hume claims he discovered an argument which will forever make it impossible for any thoughtful person to believe in miracles.¹⁴¹

This argument which Hume develops and Mackie follows up on, articulates some important points. First, our own personal experience is our only guide in determining what is a true happening in the world. What is normal and customary according to our own experiences is the foundation for making judgments concerning past events. Second, a thoughtful person will proportion their faith to the evidence. There are degrees of probability concerning what is to be believed, and we must *critically* assess all the known facts in establishing what is to be believed.

In applying these principles, Hume explains that it is common and natural for us to accept what someone else tells us about their past experiences. We are by nature inclined to tell the truth and our capacity to remember is tenacious. Of

course, a person who is delirious or noted for telling falsehoods is easily discredited. But, generally speaking, we assume that people speak the truth, Hume notes.¹⁴² What would cause us not to accept the testimony of someone? Only if we were convinced, based on our own experience and observation, that the person was mistaken. There may be contrary testimony which would cause us to question their report; there may be serious questions about the character of the person; their testimony may not be sufficiently corroborated by other witnesses; the manner of their testimony may raise questions; they may not exhibit sufficient confidence in what they are reporting as a genuine happening; they may give the appearance of being too confident in what they report. More specifically, if their report contains extraordinary or marvelous occurrences which are counter to our own personal experiences, then we rightly are suspicious of their testimony. In these cases, we require a more stringent proof and are inclined not to believe the report, since it would be contrary to customary experiences.

But what about miracles? "A miracle is a violation of the laws of nature," Hume writes. By definition, Hume argues, a miracle is contrary to the "uniform experience" of all people.¹⁴³ Otherwise, it would not be called a miracle. It is no miracle that a person should die suddenly, but it is a miracle that a dead man should come back to life, if he really had died. Can such a report of a dead man being brought back to life be accepted as a reliable testimony?

To answer this question, Hume says we must consider which alternative is the more probable. Is the testimony given by someone with such compelling integrity that the likelihood of the testimony being true is greater than the likelihood of the event being false? In other words, which would be the greater miracle—that the witness is mistaken, or that the event really happened? "If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous than the event which he relates, then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion."¹⁴⁴

This is the main argument against miracles and against the probability that a historical revelation of God could have occurred. It is this argument which Hume says he "flatters" himself to have "discovered."¹⁴⁵ The laws of nature are based on the principle of cause and effect. This principle is uniformly established according to our experience and observation. It would be a miracle if this law were interfered with and suspended. At the same time, if the report of a highly credible witness is most unlikely to be false so that if the witness were mistaken it would constitute a miracle, then we have reached an impasse. At best "there exists a mutual destruction of arguments," so that one miracle cancels out the other.¹⁴⁶ Still, then, there is no basis for believing that a dead man can come back to life. To be sure, Hume did allow that one could be expected to believe in miracles if the falsehood of a witness would be a greater miracle than the actual physical miracle itself; but he offers other supportive reasons why miracles are impossible which together create an accumulative effect which makes it fairly certain that no witness could be called forth to convince one of a miracle really happening.¹⁴⁷

Mackie thinks Hume's reasoning is conclusive. There is no way then to accept the resurrection of Jesus; there is no need to consider the probabilities of the event since the most that could be expected to be derived out of a painstaking critical analysis of the historical evidence would be an impasse.

What Mackie failed to reckon with is that, in spite of the numerous attempts which have been made to explain the miracle of the resurrection away, each attempt has been unconvincing. All critical scholarship accepts the fact that the earliest disciples believed that Jesus was physically raised from the dead, and no explanation besides the one given in the New Testament has been successful in determining why the disciples came to their conclusion.

In the nineteenth century, David Strauss pointed out that all attempts by theologically liberal scholars to write a life of Jesus were failures because their presentations of Jesus were even less credible than the miraculous explanation given in the gospel.¹⁴⁸ His own explanation that the mythical thinking of the first-century believers is the best way to account for Jesus' resurrection has also been discredited and makes the New Testament witness even more credible. For as Karl Jaspers has pointed out in discussions with Rudolf Bultmann, it is historically inaccurate to judge the first-century as possessing a mythical mentality any more than the modern world. They, too, knew that dead men did not rise again.¹⁴⁹

Mackie fails to provide any further solution to this dilemma. It is perfectly in order to try to explain the resurrection in a natural way, if that is what the evidence requires. To date, any explanation for the belief of the earliest disciples in Jesus' resurrection has not been forthcoming which carries any degree of credibility other than the miraculous one provided by the witnesses of Jesus.¹⁵⁰ That is, the tradition of the empty tomb and the appearances of the risen Lord to the disciples stand up historically to the most severe test which can be given by the critical historical method, and believers have sufficient and highly probable reasons for affirming with intellectual integrity the historical foundation of their faith. For the self-revealing action of God in Jesus was not performed secretly "in a corner," but was done so publicly that Paul was sure King Agrippa could have examined the evidence for himself (Acts 26:26). Likewise, we today have that same opportunity.

We can say Yes to Hume, that based on the empirical evidence, along with the credibility of the original witnesses, it would be a greater "miracle" that the New Testament witnesses were wrong than that the resurrection event itself actually happened.

CONCLUSION

As we have noted, Mackie pursues Hume's skepticism into a full-blown atheism. The cumulative effect of all the non-deductive evidence, Mackie thinks, is heavily weighted in favor of an atheistic position. The conclusion here is just the

opposite. It is my perception that the nature of Christian theism is rationally coherent, ethically exemplary, psychologically healthy-minded and historically reliable and true. Each of us, of course, must make a decision for ourselves based on the larger body of evidence. The finally convincing proof for a Christian believer, however, is to experience the life-transforming grace of God as mediated through a personal relationship with the risen Lord (1 John 5:20). This is not a mere pietistic platitude, but a frank acknowledgement that one must experience the reality for oneself to know for sure.

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